News of Books and the Book World

Some True Jewish Fairy Tales Retold

The fairy story complex in the human soul has often been a puzzle to psychologists. It is an eternal art-form; it therefore must have an eternal life object. It cannot be the perpetual materialization in vision and ink of a suppressed desire or an inhibited wish, for few of us would willingly become a fairy, a gnome, a giant, a Cinderella, a Bluebeard or a black dwarf. Certainly no one would wish to be Lewis Carroll's Alice or any of the characters in either of his famous books. Many of us have secretly and overtly wished to be Falstaff or Hamlet or Huck Finn, but never the Mad Hatter or Little Red Riding Hood. The latter are too unreal, fantastic, grotesque. Their adventures are not elemental but supernatural.

Lift the fairy story, no matter how inane or simple, into the realm of the intelligence and we get nearer the sources of its eternal youth and its perpetual fascination for 'grown-ups.' The fairy story, whether written by Theodore de Banville, some ancient rabbi or Kipling, is an intellectual thing—as Blake said of human tears. It is a criticism of life, a condemnation of things as they are, a perpetual onslaught on reality, a war against the gray certainties of our daily lives.

The fairy story is always moral—that is, a judgment of conscience on instinct. The fairy legends and the folk-lore of a people embody the exact moral reactions of that people against the wishes, acts and methods of their daily lives. They tell us of the passionate aspiration of the common people toward a completer form of commonplace living. The simple virtues are always exalted. Excess is everywhere condemned. Greed and crime are satirized. Even genious is looked on askance in the best regulated fairy tales—as well it may be; for all genius is a form of "possession" and is slb to Black Art. For the great fabulist to be immortal he must remain a philistine.

Jewish Fairy Tales and Stories, translated and edited by Gerald Friedlander (Dutton), are taken from various sources. Some are from Talmud, some done out of the Old Testament; but they are all Jewish in that they never get clear of the earth. In this sense they are true fairy tales. The greatness of the Jewish soul consists in its adherence to the doctrine of one life at a time. Its spirit is unconquerable because of its respect for old Mother Earth. It is a material soul in the finest sense of that much abused word material. Take the cash and let the credit go, was not uttered by a Jew, but it might well have been. Goethe—a Gentile—has put his O. K. on that philosophy; and there lives not a rabbi of the Reformed Church of Judaism who has not quoted Omar or Goethe at least once in his Saturday or Sunday sermon. The Jew loves the things of this world wisely and well; and—hats off!—we have never heard of a Jew prohibitionist.

In the nine fairy tales and stories in this little book there is not one in which the moral is not frankly materialistic. Even in the story called *A Dream of Paradise* we have an Elysium where all the "good Israelites" sit in bliss and contentment at a little table. We believe the table is not empty, but is probably laden with a plenty of stomach warming things. Just as Paradise should be.

The Black Dwarf is a morality story on the abuse of riches. The squanderer and spendthrift goes to hell, although we do not see why, as he keeps money in circulation, which is the reason for being of money. No one, to our way of thinking, can do evil with money, as some one else gets it, no matter how foolishly spent. Extravagance is a form of altruism, and who is beloved of waiters and bellboys like a man who throws away his patrimony like a drunken sailor? But we did not write *The Black Dwarf*, so our criticism of its moral is no doubt impudent.

In all the tales in the book, as should be the case in every book, virtue and honesty and frugality are rewarded, and their opposites condemned and punished. This may not occur in real life—always; there has been much to do over the point. But that is just the mission of the real fairy tale—to keep us to the straight and narrow, so that we shall live in peace and happiness forever after, and so forth.

The Real Meredith

Perhaps, after all, it is at picnics, and especially at "the funeral of the picnic," as Meredith described the bedraggled homeward journey through the rain; at family exchanges of visits and tea parties, or at "Shakespeare readings"—in which not only Meredith but a man named Furnivall took part—that we learn to know a man best.

It is from one of Lady Butcher's many visits to Box Hill cottage that we get this particularly interesting glimpse of Meredith. Lady Butcher says she stumbled when she got out of the carriage, tore her dress and bruised herself considerably and altogether made a good deal of commotion, which Mr. Meredith did not like, since "he was always a little impatient of anything that interrupted conversation."

In fact, George Meredith walks right out of his book. More pretentious volumes have not succeeded in making him half so real. And in no volume, we are sure, has a more honest effort been made to have the reader see him plain. It is interesting in these *Memories of George Meredith, O. M.*, (Scribners) to witness the extraordinary influence Meredith had upon the author. Although Lady Butcher, who was born Miss Brandreth, does not say so, it is evident that she has written with his approval (or disapproval) in mind all the time. The result is a book in excellent taste.

The author was a girl of thirteen when she first met Meredith. She was visiting her relatives, the Gordons, near neighbors of the Box Hill cottage. She arose early one morning to go with her cousin Jim Gordon (whom she later married) to see the sun rise from Box Hill. On the way the boy and girl threw pebbles at Meredith's windows to wake him and ask him ot come too—which he did in a hastily improvised costume. It was on this morning, Lady Butcher says, that she first heard Meredith's amazing talk. It was the beginning of forty-one years of unbroken friendship.

Lady Butcher has been said to be the original of Cecilia Halkett in *Beauchamp's Career*. She tells us that Meredith always insisted that Renee and not Cecilia was his favorite in that book. It was through Lady Butcher's family that Stevenson and Meredith met. When Meredith's wife died his daughter was sent to stay with Lady Butcher, or Mrs. Gordon as she was then. The intimacy was the closest. It was Lady Butcher whom Meredith told one day that he was leaving the manuscript of *Richard Feverel* to his gardener and good servant, Cole, in the hope that he might be able to get something for it some day. It was on this same day that Meredith confessed to not feeling well:

"I feel like the acid drop after the boy had kept it a long time in his mouth when he says to himself, 'I've sucked enough. I'll scrunch.'"

Lady Butcher says there was no doubt that Meredith's sense of humor was "abnormally developed." In fact, it seems to have taken a good deal of the patience he was always counselling for his friends and family to bow their heads meekly when he chose to let the lightning of his wit play about them. He said to his young friend one day that he had hopes of her since she bore thwacks bravely.

Obligation is the word she recalls he most frequently used in his moral homilies, and by obligation he meant duty. He warned her to guard against self-satisfaction. He said that the worst thing that could happen to any young man or woman was to whisper to themselves: "Not I as commoner men!" As the only cure for such complacency he advised welcoming the "comic spirit—the sword of common sense." When walking he said he trained himself to observe, not to feel. One time he said of some book criticism that all the time others had been criticising him he had been observing them, which was the "crueller process."

Although from the beginning sympathetic with the *Revolt of Fair Ladies*, Meredith apparenly was by no means inclined to give to young women the glorious freedom of his own heroines. He was particular about what books young women read and what plays they saw, and would never permit his own daughter to go on even a short journey unchaperoned. Of Maupassant's stories he once said: "They are really improper; you had better not read them. I could be funny if I neglected the proprieties as he does." More surprising still, he found Jane Austen's heroines "wanting in refinement." He objected to swearing, saying constant use of oaths was a proof of a "bucolic mind and a limited vocabulary."

There are a good many letters in the volume; not many are quotable as a whole. The following was written to Miss Brandreth when she was looking for a Shylock for one of the Shakespeare readings. It gives a family as well as a public view of the author of *The Egotist*:

> MY DEAR MISS BRANDRETH: I know Palgrave Simpson, am very fond of him and believe he will do anything for me, until he knows you, when he will be subject to a new allegiance. He is of ripe age, turned 70, and with a consuming passion for the stage, and the dear heart of him so frankly nourished by flattery that he will open his mouth and shut his eyes and take it in a ladle—so he will just suit you.
>
> How I dislike men (in the abstract) of a certain age who pretend to refuse their spoonful, and all the while their honest old lips are dribbling at the corners. If you are moved to do a kindness, have my wife the day before I come—whisk her to music or the play. For my part I don't like to leave my baby gal alone in the house for more than one night.
>
> . . . believe me for life—your devoted servant and lord.
>
> GEORGE MEREDITH.

Meredithians will welcome this book and will find in it much to explain the novelist and give background to the novels and poems.

Poems by Cecil Roberts

Here is an English poet of more significance than several whose names are more widely bruited about these days. With almost impeccable technique and a distinguished method of expression that will give the true poetry lover delight he sings of the old eternal verities. Love of country, of nature, a wholesomeness of philosophy that the war has failed to destroy and occasionally a bit of metrical filigree that exhibits his sureness of ear make *Poems* (Stokes) a book to be prized. John Masefield has written a short introduction to the volume, in which he points out the virtues of the war poems included.

Mr. Spargo on Bolshevist Natures

If anybody thinks a Socialist is a Bolshevist, he should read John Spargo's *The Psychology of Bolshevism* (Harpers). Mr. Spargo is a Socialist, and therefore, as he would say, a rationalist. He finds the Bolshevist the least rational of human beings; in fact quite irrational and not interested at all in realities.

Mr. Spargo says the Bolshevist is under the hypnosis of words, seizing upon catch words and stock phrases, and weaving them into a "patter" song as glib as any in Gilbert and Sullivan. Thus the very words Bolshevism and Sovietism have come to have a glamour all their own, such as Sabotage and Syndicalism had a few years ago.

The Bolshevist has a way of repeating over and over again certain words and shibboleths—as if that settled it. They are unoriginal. Lenine himself, Mr. Spargo says, is not original, and in fact owes his strength to his unoriginality and even orthodoxy. The Bolsheviats are unmoved by contradictions. They are bored by proofs. There is no need to say to a Bolshevist, "But don't you know?" or "Isn't this true?" or "Wasn't that contradicted?" He is a man of a fixed idea as well as a fixed vocabulary.

The only facts the Bolshevist is interested in are those that seem to support his own convictions, emotionally arrived at. Mr. Spargo's analysis of the parlor Bolshevist particularly reads like an alienist's report on a nervous patient: "exaggerated egotism, extreme intolerance, craving for mental and emotional excitement, excessive dogmatism, hyperbolic language, impulsive judgment, emotional instability, intense hero worship, propensity for intrigues and conspiracies," &c., &c.

And yet he says the Bolshevist is a simple and not at all complex creature, easy to understand; one to whom black is black and white is white and everything else is equally simple with no doubtful twilight zones; one for whom all the intricacies and complexities that trouble the normal mind do not exist.

Mr. Spargo seems to think that if it were not Bolshevism for the Bolshevik-minded people, it would be something else; something in the nature of Sinn Fein in Ireland, native uprisings in India, strikes in London, bandits in Mexico—each has a charm all its own. They are willing to take a gambler's chance at anything. They like to play with fire. They are not burdened with responsibilities.

Although probably the only acid test would be to see whether a burned child does dread the fire, Mr. Spargo advises leaving the Bolshevist alone. Permit him to talk. Let desires be unsuppressed. The analogy may be painful, but it used to be observed that the fizz soon departed from the uncorked bottle. The Bolshevist is a particularly good subject for the popular psycho-analytical study—and Mr. Spargo in his book turns him inside out.

"The Singing Caravan"

Memories of James Elroy Flecker's *The Golden Journey to Samarcand* are brought to life by Robert Vansittart's *The Singing Caravan: A Suf Tale* (Doran). The likeness between the two books is merely superficial, however, for Flecker was much the greater poet, and although Mr. Vansittart displays great skill in metrical structure and suggests more often than not what is supposed to be the Persian attitude toward life and death and love, the inspiration is rather weak, and there are many times when the poems ring hollow. As vivid pictures, entertaining to read, and as narrative that compels the interest by its exotic subject *The Singing Caravan* is worth while. The wisdom of the East is suggested more than once in the legends that make up the book. So is the color, the strangeness, the varying impulses of life that is very close to essentials.